

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 328 927

CS 507 392

AUTHOR Holecek, Peggy
TITLE Education or Entertainment: The Television Portrayal of Single Parents in the '90s.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (76th, Chicago, IL, November 1-4, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Characterization; Conflict Resolution; *One Parent Family; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Role; *Programing (Broadcast); Social Behavior; Social Change; Television Research; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Family Communication; Television Networks

ABSTRACT

As the number of single-parent families has grown in the United States, network television programming has increasingly included programs portraying single parents and their attempts to cope with the role. In a study, the "Fall Preview" edition of "TV Guide" magazine was used to select programs featuring single mothers or fathers as major characters. Six programs met the prescribed criteria and a total of 23 episodes were recorded over a 6-week period (some episodes were cancelled owing to scheduling changes). Of the episodes recorded, 16 specifically dealt with conflict among family members. In all of the programs, parent-child conflict was resolved through discussion. Advice was sought from third persons in most of these programs. In some cases, other characters filled the role of the missing parent in resolving conflicts. These programs included frequent displays of family affection and emphasized the belief that the family is the number one priority. Positive messages were presented to single parent viewers, who were portrayed as not being bound to sex stereotypes. Future studies of prime-time single parents could address relationship change with adult children, models of behavior presented to children, and education in the use of specific problem-solving strategies. (SG)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED328927

**"Education or Entertainment:
The Television Portrayal of Single Parents in the '90's.**

Peggy Holecek

Northern Illinois University

1990 Speech Communication Association Convention

Chicago, Illinois

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Marketa J.
Holecek

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

CS507392

The conventional family unit or nuclear family consisting of two parents and their children is becoming an endangered structure in our society. As the traditional two parent family structure slowly vanishes, the number of single parent families is growing rapidly. The number of single parent families doubled between 1970 and 1986, increasing from 5.5 million to 10.2 million. (American Demographics, 1987.) This trend does not show signs of reversal and, for every 10.5 persons who were married in the United States during 1988, 5.0 were divorced. (Statistical Abstracts, 1988.) Current statistics show that female single parents number at 6,297,000 and single males head 955,000 households. (Information Please Almanac, 1990.) This phenomena does not show signs of reversal and it seems that the large numbers of single parent families will continue to increase and exist in the future. (American Demographics, 1987.)

This shift in family structure is becoming an issue that is more readily discussed and accepted in American society as the number of non-traditional families continue to grow. Evidence of the changing American family can be seen in our society and viewed on our televisions. Since the late seventies, network programming has included a small number of programs featuring single parents and their attempt to cope with the role. These types of programs have been in existence for some time, yet little research exists on single parents and their portrayal on prime-time television.

The literature search for this study did not uncover any research devoted to the specific issues confronted, roles assumed by the single parent or ways of dealing with the missing parent's absence in the family. Some related articles, however, do provide some interesting insight to the subject. A content analysis conducted by Skill, Robinson and Wallace found that the nonconventional family is most often presented in the half-hour situation comedy and that, overall, network television presents the non-standard interpretations of family life, comfortably framed in the non-threatening comedic form. (Skill, Robinson, Wallace, 1987.) Morgan and Harr-Mazer reported that television develops a social reality for views typified by ideas such as, "families are good" and "single parents are bad." (Skill, Robinson, Wallace, 1987.) A study on prime-time parenting by Dail and Way found that network television programming appears to be realistically reflecting

the documented increase in single parent households and there is little evidence that parental role performance which reflects this change in household structure is being presented. (Dail and Way, 1985.) Overall, mothers are shown in more traditional ways which do not support changes in women's roles which must occur as family structures change. (Dail and Way, 1985.) Greenberg found that the observation of family role interaction patterns may lead directly to imitating behaviors displayed by television models or to behavioral change mediated by attitude change. (Greenberg, 1980.)

Although the research that is available deals with single parents to a certain extent, there is the need for a more in-depth analysis of prime-time television programming that focuses upon single parent families. It is important to recognize mass media effects as significant and even more significantly when the media deals with an ongoing social change. This intended study is designed to investigate the nature of parenting behaviors by single parents on prime-time television. Ninety-eight percent of all households in the United States have at least one television set and, according to statistics, the average American watches the television for approximately seven hours per day. (Statistical Abstracts, 1988.) It is important to study the messages that viewers receive since these messages are potentially significant and have been shown to affect the viewer's behavior.

Methodology

The "Fall Preview" edition of the TV Guide was used to select prime-time programs featuring either a single mother or a single father as a major character in the program. Programs selected for inclusion in the study were required to include the following:

1. The program must feature a non-traditional family structure, specifically a single person responsible for a child or children, on a weekly basis.

2. The program must include a child or children living with the parent, or in regular contact with the parent. Age of the dependent is not a factor for either including or omitting a program.
3. The program must follow a thirty minute drama or situation comedy format.
4. The program must be currently airing during prime-time during the Fall of 1990 on one of the three major networks--ABC, CBS, or NBC.

The following programs met the prescribed criteria: *Who's The Boss*, *Coach*, *The Fanelli Boys*, *Full House*, *Empty Nest* and *Working It Out*. The program descriptions in the TV Guide functioned as verification of each program's family structure. Once identified, program content was varified by Brooks' and Marsh's, The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows: 1946 to Present. The programs were recorded during a six week period. Occasionally the regularly scheduled programs were preempted by baseball play-offs or network special presentations. The programs were coded with reference to the following criteria:

1. Sex of the designated head of the household.
2. Roles assumed by the head of the household.
3. Character traits displayed by the head of the household.
4. Style of conflict resolution utilized.
5. Character traits displayed by the character responsible for conflict resolution.
6. Person(s) responsible for resolving conflict within the thirty minute situation comedy or drama.
7. Issues addressed within the thirty minute situation comedy or drama.

Results

Of the twenty-three programs that were recorded, sixteen dealt specifically with conflict between family members. In all of the sixteen programs, the conflict between parent and child was resolved through discussion. In twelve of the episodes, however, the person responsible for resolving the conflict sought help from another character prior to the

discussion. The person responsible for initiating the discussion was not always the parent. In eight of the episodes the parent assumed an instrumental role in resolving the issue and actively worked to initiate the discussion. In six of the episodes, the parent assumed an advisory role or acted as an assistant to another character who had assumed responsibility for the character needing guidance. Finally, in two of the episodes, the parent assumed a neutral role and was not responsible in any way for the conflict resolution.

In episodes that involved characters other than the parent as solely responsible for the conflict resolution had a variety of substitutes for the roles. The substitute roles are as follows:

<u>Name of Program</u>	<u>Sex of Parent</u>	<u>Romantically Involved</u>	<u>Substitute used for missing parent</u>
<i>Full House</i>	single father	no	eldest daughter father's brother brother's girlfriend father's best friend
<i>Empty Nest</i>	single father	no	none
<i>Working It Out</i>	single mother	yes	none evident in episodes viewed
<i>Who's The Boss</i>	single mother single father	occasionally	main characters substitute for the missing parent
<i>The Fanelli Boys</i>	single mother	no	mother's brother--a priest
<i>Coach</i>	single father	yes	his girlfriend

For the most part, the issues were approached in a caring manner by either the parent or the substitute for the parent. The person who led the discussion was portrayed very positively in all cases. Most commonly displayed character traits were honesty, directness, compassion, genuine kindness and caring for the other character. These characteristics complemented the issues addressed in the programs which focused on the following:

<u>Issues Addressed</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
1. Sibling rivalry	3
2. Absence of a parent in a child's life	1
3. Becoming a responsible person	7
4. Children's jealousy over a parent's developing romantic relationship	1
5. Allowing a child to grow up	3
6. Family should stick together	5
7. Building child's self-esteem	1

The issues addressed were always resolved in the thirty minute time slot, and were not referred to in following episodes.

Discussion

The results of this study develop further information on the role that television plays in our society and the message that it conveys to viewers. The programs that are currently aired on prime-time television provide some educational benefits, but are most strongly categorized as entertainment. The strengths of the single parent family program are the frequent display of affection and the belief that the family is the number one priority. The single parent families are tightly-knit units that rely on discussion to solve problems. Adult figures regularly set aside time for their children, regardless of work pressures or social engagements. The absence

of the missing parent is neatly filled by a variety of substitute mothers or fathers. The children on these programs certainly do not want for attention of affection and appear to be happy, well-adjusted individuals, despite the variation in family structure.

The program that focused least on parent-child relationships was NBC's *Working It Out*. This program premiered this season and thus far each episode has been devoted to the single, career-oriented woman of the '90's search for an intimate, meaningful relationship. Her daughter has been present in each episode but most of the dialogue has been directed toward characters other than her daughter. The message that this program is creating is disturbing because the child is portrayed as quite secondary to the mother's career and personal life. This program may be entertaining, but its educational value is weak in comparison to the other five programs that are currently airing.

Overall, the programs currently airing present positive messages to single parents of the '90's. The parents are not completely bound to their sex role stereotypes and a shift toward more androgynous single parent figures is occurring on television. This is an important educational message for single parents to receive because they are required to fill the role of both the mother and the father. In addition, the viewer is exposed to positive ideas such as family unity despite the family structure, discussion as a means of solving problems and empathic listening as a means of understanding others. These educational messages coupled with the entertainment factors of the programs join to form, for the most part, positive messages for single parents of the '90's.

Implications and Future Directions

The programs present a variety of situations in which a single parent may experience difficulty when raising children. The programs may offer the parent educational information on the subject and provide insight on some of the issues that arise. "When both personal experience and experience with others are blocked, an individual can either turn to what is

available in the mass media--television, books, movies, radio--to gain access or fail to develop the blueprint or gain the experience because no other means are available." (Luker and Johnston, 1988.) In addition, the issues confronted on television may provide insight to children living in single parent families and provide them with a greater understanding of the feeling that their parent may be feeling. In addition, the programs may help validate the feelings that children may be experiencing and offer possible solutions to troublesome situations. "Television family models could be exposed to orient the child's responses to such issues as the predominance of certain types of family structures, the power associated with particular family roles, feelings of satisfaction with present family structure and interaction patterns and structural relationships of families of differing racial and socioeconomical backgrounds, and expectations concerning parent and sibling behaviors." (Greenberg, 1980.)

Future studies of prime-time single parents could include such issues as relationship change with adult children present, other models of behavior presented to children and specific strategies used to cope with the problem of an absent parent in the family structure. In addition, a larger sample of programming would be beneficial to understanding the range of behaviors exhibited, issues confronted and messages presented by the various prime-time television programs. A continued interest in the area of single parents as portrayed by the mass media will increase the information available to parents and will encourage improved understanding of the issues that face a large portion of American society.

References

Brooks, Tim and Marsh, Earle. (1988) The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows: 1946 to Present. 4th edition, Ballantine Books, New York.

Dail, Paula W. and Way, Wendy L. "What do Parents Observe About Parenting from Prime Time Television" Family Relations. Oct. 1985.

"Demographic Forecasts," American Demographics. June 1987, v.9.

"Fall Preview," TV Guide. September 15, 1990. V. 38, No. 37.

Greenberg, Bradley S. Life on Television. 1980. Ablex Publishing Corporation.

The 1990 Information Please Almanac. 43rd edition. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1990.

Luker, Richard and Johnston, Jerome. (1988). "TV and Teens: Television in Adolescent Social Development." Social Education. Sept. 1988.

Selnow, Gary W. (1986) "Solving Problems on Prime-Time Television" Journal of Communication. v. 36, Spring 1986.

Skill, Thomas, Robinson, James D. and Wallace, Samuel P. (1987) "Portrayal of Families on PrimeTime TV: Structure, Type and Frequency." Journalism Quarterly. v.64, n. 2-3, Summer-Fall 1987.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1988). Statistical Abstract of the United States. 108th Edition. Washington, D.C., 1987.